

## **THE MILITARY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A 'CULTURE OF INSTABILITY'?**

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In the period from early 2000 to mid 2002, a series of incidents involving the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) has highlighted continuing problems within the Force, and once again raised questions about the possibility of military intervention in politics.

### **Recent unrest and official reviews**

Early in 2000 a group of PNGDF personnel staged an angry protest outside Defence headquarters in Port Moresby, demanding a 100 per cent pay rise (they eventually received 5 per cent). Then in September that year, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Papua New Guinea's independence, disgruntled soldiers of the PNGDF's Second Battalion, returning to Moem Barracks in Wewak to find there was no food in the mess, went on a rampage, burning down the regimental headquarters and officers' mess and causing visiting Papua New Guinean and Indonesian dignitaries, at Moem to celebrate the independence anniversary, to flee. In a separate incident the following week, soldiers marched on the Port Moresby General Hospital to recover the body of a colleague shot dead by police following an armed holdup in the national capital; rocks were thrown and a police vehicle set alight, and rumours that soldiers were about to march on the National Parliament forced the parliament to postpone its session.

The incidents of September 2000 prompted the creation of a parliamentary Ministerial task Force on Defence, chaired by the Defence minister, Muki Taranupi, to examine the status of the PNGDF. The Task Force reported in October. Introducing the report into parliament, Prime Minister Mekere Morauta said: 'the PNGDF and the Defence Department cannot provide the protection that the people of Papua New Guinea need'; if hostilities or a national emergency occurred, he told parliament, 'a credible force could not be mobilised in less than 30 days'. He spoke of a 'culture of instability' in the PNGDF, and suggested that the institutional breakdown of the Force was the

result of years of neglect and mismanagement. The report itself argued that the basic needs of the PNGDF were not being met, that basic management structures and systems were not appropriate or not working, and that critical issues relating to the mission and purpose, capacity, resourcing and structure of the Force needed to be re-examined. Prime Minister Morauta foreshadowed a 'radical overhaul' of the PNGDF and announced that he would ask the Commonwealth secretary general for assistance in this.

In November 2000 a Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (CEPG), headed by a former New Zealand defence secretary, Gerard Hensley, arrived in Port Moresby to begin its review.<sup>1</sup> At the time, there was talk of reducing force size from 4200 to around 3000 at end 2000 and 1500 by mid 2001. This was broadly consistent with recommendations for restructuring of the PNGDF contained in defence white papers of 1996 and 1999. Cabinet had in fact approved proposals for a smaller force, and a redundancy list had been drawn up (though it was being strongly contested). Following talks with the Australian government it was announced that Australia would increase its support for the PNGDF under the Defence Co-operation Program, in part as a once-off payment to enable the PNGDF to pay entitlements owed to soldiers and meet other outstanding debts, and cover the costs of downsizing. Australia would also provide up to thirty defence advisers. Assistance to the Defence Department was also anticipated from the World Bank.

The report of the CEPG (CEPG 2001) was presented to the government in January 2001. It contained a number of observations about structural imbalance, maintenance and supply deficiencies, financial and personnel management, and discipline. It also recommended a dramatic reduction in force size, from 4150 to 1900 within six months through a Voluntary Release Scheme.

While the recommendation for cutting force size was not new, extracts from the report were leaked before adequate consultation with troops had taken place, and after the CEPG report had been accepted by cabinet in March 2001 rumours of imminent downsizing generated an angry response. There was particular resentment that the recommendations had come from a predominantly 'foreign' group and that Australian influence was present. Within PNGDF's main base at Murray Barracks – where there was already a large number of soldiers who had been made redundant but were still awaiting redundancy payments – a group of around one hundred soldiers called on the government to reject the recommendations of the CEPG and to resign, and there were reports of soldiers

<sup>1</sup> Other members of the CEPG were Major General Michael Jeffrey, an Australian former commander of the PNGDF, Jamaican Hugh Small QC, and senior Papua New Guinean bureaucrat Charles Lepani.

breaking into the armoury. The soldiers also called for the removal of Australian military advisers. When the Defence minister came to address the soldiers he was chased away, and there was some destruction of property within the barracks. However, the soldiers did not carry their dispute beyond the barracks, despite the urgings of some national politicians, who, with an election on the horizon, were keen to discredit the Morauta government, and of student activists at the University of Papua New Guinea, who suggested that the soldiers join with students and trade unionists in a demonstration against the government's acceptance of structural adjustment measures imposed by the World Bank. (In a subsequent student demonstration, in June 2001, police fired on demonstrators, killing four people.)

In the event, the dispute was resolved fairly quickly, but only when the prime minister agreed to rescind the cabinet decision on force size (though, in fact, the downsizing process has continued) and to grant amnesty to those involved in the protest. In a public statement, Prime Minister Morauta said that the proposed downsizing had been shelved 'to ensure stability and avoid the issues being politicized' (*Post-Courier* 20 March 2001).

Less than a year later another, more serious, incident occurred in Wewak, when rebellious soldiers, in a further protest about the proposed restructuring, took control of Moem Barracks, burning down the communications centre and an administration block which also housed military intelligence, breaking into the armoury, and chasing some officers and their families out of the compound. A 13-point petition presented by the soldiers to then opposition leader Sir Michael Somare (a resident of Wewak) included, as well as industrial demands, calls for the resignation of the prime minister, and of the commander PNGDF, and several other political demands, including a halt to the privatization of government assets and proposed land mobilization (see *The National* 12 March 2002). At the time, an editorial in *The National* newspaper (12 March 2002) warned: 'Moem mutiny threatens our democracy'; 'the main aim of the rebellious soldiers', it said, 'is the political overthrow of the elected government of the day'. On this occasion, after negotiations between the soldiers and a PNGDF crisis management team failed to resolve the dispute, the Barracks was retaken in a military operation (see *The National* 25, 28 March 2002) and around thirty soldiers were subsequently arrested and face court-martial and civil criminal charges. And Prime Minister Morauta reiterated his government's commitment to the restructuring of the PNGDF (*The National* 20 March 2002).

## Background to the current disputes

Problems of deteriorating capacity, declining morale, and poor discipline in the PNGDF are longstanding. They were highlighted during the Bougainville conflict, when the PNGDF not only was unable to contain the Bougainville Revolutionary Army but was involved in human rights violations and occasional confrontation with the civilian government (see, for example, Liria 1993; May 1997). Successive governments have failed to address the issue effectively.

In 1988 a *Defence Policy Paper* proposed a ten-year programme to replace major equipment, reorganize force structure and enhance defence capabilities. Approval of a Ten-Year Development Plan for the PNGDF did not come until 1991, however, by which time the Bougainville conflict was well under way. This plan provided for an expansion of the Force, to 5200 by 1995. However, in 1992, without any explicit change in policy, the minister for Finance outlined budgetary proposals for the law and order sector which included a scaling down of PNGDF force size from 4200 to 2500-3000. For some time, these two mutually incompatible policy decisions co-existed without either being implemented. In 1996 proposals for a fundamental restructuring of the PNGDF were set out in a Defence white paper. These envisaged a smaller, more mobile, more highly trained, and better equipped force. Little immediate progress was made in the implementation of the 1996 proposals, which were essentially endorsed in a revised white paper in 1999.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, the frustration of the Chan government at the PNGDF's inability to achieve a military solution to the Bougainville conflict had resulted in the decision to hire military consultants Sandline International, precipitating the 'Sandline affair' (see Dinnen, May and Regan 1997; Dorney 1998; O'Callaghan 1999). Brigadier General Singirok's defiance of the government over the Sandline contract received considerable popular support, and in the event gave impetus to the Bougainville peace process. But it also created divisions within the PNGDF and had pronounced negative effects in the longer term, both in exacerbating existing problems of instability in the office of commander (which changed seven times between March 1997 and October 2001) and in increasing factionalism within the force. After 1997, factional splits partly followed a division between those troops who had supported General Singirok (particularly the Special Forces Unit which had been created under Singirok's command and had spearheaded the action to remove Sandline) and those who had not taken part in the Sandline affair (and were associated

with the Special Operations Group set up after Singirok's sacking in March 1997 to restore order in the barracks), but were based primarily on regional identities.

A particular aspect of regional factionalism within the force has been the growing resentment among highlanders that the highlands provinces are significantly underrepresented at senior officer level.

In 1997 the PNGDF was deployed to assist police in providing security for the conduct of the national election. In the Eastern Highlands, however, troops were accused of physically assaulting supporters of the outgoing defence minister, Mathias Ijape, and in Enga Province several soldiers were arrested on charges that they had assisted particular candidates. General Singirok, having been removed from command of the PNGDF, had also campaigned for selected candidates in the highlands (specifically, a group of candidates, backed by Melanesian Solidarity, who had supported Singirok in his opposition to the Sandline contract). Consequently, in 2002, amidst talk of the PNGDF's being subjected to 'outside influences' (see, for example, *The National* 15 March 2002, quoting PNGDF chief of Staff, Captain Ur Tom), it was decided that the army would be used in security operations during the national election only as a last resort, and troops were confined to barracks with leave cancelled. A change in the Defence portfolio, and announced changes in senior PNGDF positions early in 2002 (which were deferred after a legal challenge) were also seen as attempts to ensure the neutrality of the Defence Force in the lead-up to the election. (In April, however, it was reported that Defence Intelligence had informed the PNGDF commander, Commodore Ilau, that these changes were 'election-related' and evidence of a plot by 'a major political party' to halt the retrenchment exercise and change the current command structure of the Force (*The National* 23 April 2002; also see *The National* 29 April 2002, 'Sir Michael [Somare] fears election rigging'.))

Notwithstanding these measures, it was reported in June that several soldiers, including a lieutenant colonel, had absented themselves and taken part in the election campaign. The civilian Defence secretary was also reported to have left his office and to have been seen with candidates in the highlands. Several soldiers were subsequently arrested in the Southern Highlands and charged with electoral offences. In July, as the law and order situation in the highlands deteriorated, preventing voting from taking place in much of the Southern Highlands (where 'failed elections' were eventually declared in six electorates), the PNGDF was deployed to assist the police.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account see May (1993), the annual reviews in *Asia Pacific Security Outlook* (Tokyo and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange), and papers by Lt. Col. James Laki, in NRI 2000a,b.

### The potential for a coup?

The actions of disgruntled soldiers in September 2000 reflected a serious lack of discipline, but had only minor impact beyond the PNGDF itself. The confrontation at Murray Barracks in April 2001 was a more serious incident, though as I argued at the time, the action of the soldiers could be seen less as an 'attempted coup', as some were apt to describe it, than as an industrial dispute. Without downplaying the seriousness of *any* episode in which the disciplined forces defy an elected government (and recognizing that military coups are not infrequently prompted by soldiers seeking to safeguard their material interests), what was salient in April 2001 was that the rebellious soldiers did not go outside the barracks, and did not accept the invitation to join students and trade unionists in a more broadly-based protest. Their actions in 2001, indeed, were more constrained than in 1989, when soldiers marched on the National Parliament to protest their disappointment at lower-than-expected pay increases.

Evidence of links between soldiers and serving or aspiring politicians, however, gives more substantial cause for concern. In recent years there have been persistent reports of PNGDF weapons being stolen, borrowed or hired by *raskols*, participants in intergroup fighting, and the *sekuriti* (bodyguards) of bigmen and politicians. There is also evidence that former *raskols* have been recruited into the PNGDF and that some discharged soldiers (often still living in the barracks) have been involved in *raskol* activity. In both the Murray Barracks and Moem mutinies, also, discharged soldiers were involved.

Most observers (including myself) still believe that the probability of significant military intervention in politics in Papua New Guinea is very low. Not only do the small size of the Force, its lack of cohesion, the longstanding antipathy between the PNGDF and the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, and the geography of the country all pose difficulties for potential coup makers,<sup>3</sup> but, given the localized nature of political power in Papua New Guinea and the difficulties which even a legitimate government has in governing, it is difficult to envisage what those who carried a coup could do next. Nevertheless, the prospects of collaboration between disgruntled soldiers and opportunistic politicians to challenge an elected government can no longer be entirely ruled out. The Sandline affair, and the challenge to the government's implementation of the CEPG report and earlier proposals, have demonstrated to PNGDF personnel that a show of force can bring about a shift in government policy, and the emergence of factionalism within the Force, and factional links to

politicians, has created a climate in which military professionalism has been at least partially undermined.

The appointment of a new commander in October 2001, and the withdrawal of troops from Bougainville following the signing of a Bougainville Peace Agreement the same year, provide an opportunity for the government and the PNGDF to address the problems of capability, morale and discipline in the Force, and to adapt the Force to the needs, and budgetary constraints, of the 2000s. It has become clear, however, that if the decline in the professionalism of the PNGDF is to be halted and reversed, there needs to be a substantial change in the present culture of the Force.

<sup>3</sup> Though not, as former Papua New Guinea based army officer Trevor Rogers reminds me, insurmountable difficulties.